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<rrh> ‘It’ll get worse before it gets better’

<vrh>Davidson et al.

‘It’ll get worse before it gets better’: Local experiences of living in a regeneration area

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Gill Davidson

Gill Davidson is a researcher at Sustainable Cities Research Institute, in the School of the Built and Natural Environment at Northumbria University. Her research interests include urban regeneration; housing; health, wellbeing, and quality of life; community engagement; climate change; and the voluntary and community sector.

David McGuinness

David McGuinness is a researcher at Sustainable Cities Research Institute, in the School of the Built and Natural Environment at Northumbria University. His research encompasses economic development, urban regeneration, sustainable development and disparities in sub-national development, with particular reference to making sense of the demise of the English regional agenda; the Coalition government’s emerging Localism agenda; exploring the future for deprived neighbourhoods in challenging economic times; and the ongoing pursuit of a formula to develop sustainable urban neighbourhoods.

Paul Greenhalgh

Dr Paul Greenhalgh is a Reader in Property Economics in the School of the Built and Natural Environment at Northumbria University. His research interests include urban regeneration impact analysis, urban policy evaluation, commercial and industrial property market modelling, redevelopment of brownfield land, property development appraisal, and the application of GIS to the modelling of commercial property markets

in urban areas. His PhD investigated property occupier chains and market filtering in Tyne and Wear, generated by office and industrial development.

Paul Braidford

Paul Braidford is a Senior Research Fellow at St Chad's College. He has specialist regional knowledge of Foreign Direct Investment, skills and SME-related issues across a wide range of sectors in the North East of England. His research interests include labour market conditions, direct foreign investment in the region, and business support issues in a wide range of contexts. He is Editor of the Northern Economic Review and Co-Editor of Regional Insights. [biography here](#)

Fred Robinson

Professor Fred Robinson is a tutor and a full-time Professorial Fellow at St Chad's College, an Honorary Research Fellow in the Sociology Department at Durham University, and Honorary Editor of the Northern Economic Review journal. Fred served as a Special Advisor to the Select Committee on the Regeneration of Former Coalfield Areas. His research interests include: urban and regional development, with particular reference to North East England; the social impact of economic change; processes, politics and practice in urban regeneration; and local economic development.

Gill Davidson

Research Associate, Sustainable Cities Research Institute, Floor 2, Wynne Jones Centre, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK

Tel: +44 (0)191 2437186; e-mail: gill.davidson@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract The negative consequences of living in deprived neighbourhoods for residents' quality of life are well documented. Area-based regeneration initiatives are invariably concerned with improving local quality of life over the long term. The process of regeneration, however, can itself directly result in immediate and potentially lasting negative effects for local communities. This paper discusses some of the ways in which living in an area undergoing regeneration can adversely affect

inhabitants' quality of life, including problems associated with voids, relocation, demolitions, environmental quality, complexity, funding issues, uncertainty, frustration, fear for the future and consultation fatigue. A case study approach draws examples from a deprived neighbourhood in the North East of England. The conclusion discusses some of the possible implications for future regeneration policy, including: the importance of ongoing communication between professionals and communities; the need to value local people's experience, judgement and the contribution they can make to local decision-making processes; recognition that successful regeneration can take many years; and the implications of current UK government policy.

Keywords: *Urban regeneration, community engagement, liveability, quality of life, void properties*

INTRODUCTION

The impacts that the various characteristics of neighbourhoods — such as physical, environmental, economic, social and cultural factors — can have on their inhabitants have been well documented.^{1–5} The quality and liveability of neighbourhoods is known to affect people's quality of life, with specific regard to perceptions about where they live, satisfaction with housing and feelings of attachment to people and place.⁶

It has been suggested that perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the area in which one lives are related to a number of factors, including location and housing market context,⁷ physical and social environment, local amenities, housing quality⁸ and the reputation and status of an area.⁸ Satisfaction with one's local residential area has been described as one of the most important predictors of life satisfaction, particularly for lower income groups.⁹

Neighbourhood regeneration initiatives aim to improve the lives of local residents, and there is considerable evidence that such programmes can lead to positive outcomes. Evaluators of the UK Government's New Deal for Communities

programme¹⁰ recorded positive impacts on communities and individuals, including improvements in areas such as education, employment, health, housing and the environment, with the greatest benefits observed in the most deprived neighbourhoods.^{11–13}

The negative impacts of regeneration have also been recognised. Another finding from the New Deal for Communities evaluation was that, despite acknowledging that neighbourhood improvements had enhanced their lives, 40 per cent of residents still wanted to leave the neighbourhood.^{13,14} Regeneration areas are likely to have a high population turnover, which has been found to undermine social networks and erode residents' feelings of trust, safety and security.¹⁵ Research into the former government's Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder areas¹⁶ has identified the substantial impact that demolition and relocation can have on affected residents owing to a variety of factors, including attachment to home and neighbourhood, as well as the potential 'affordability gap' when the compensation they are offered is insufficient to buy a new home elsewhere.¹⁷

Elsewhere, the problem of 'burnout' has been described for community members who take an active role in regeneration plans, but who find that the intense demands on their time and energy means that it is difficult to sustain their involvement over the longer term.^{18,19} The term 'regeneration fatigue'²⁰ has been coined to refer to areas that suffer from persistent and extensive multiple deprivation, despite repeated failed attempts to regenerate them, in which communities become increasingly hard to convince that 'things will be different this time around'.²⁰ It has also been suggested that it is the local communities themselves that may end up bearing the brunt of responsibility when regeneration attempts fail.²¹

Writers in the area of neighbourhood change have suggested that there is still a need for further research to improve understanding of the ways in which people experience, perceive and respond to it,¹⁵ and that neighbourhood perceptions may be a more accurate predictor of residential satisfaction than other, more quantitative variables.²² To provide further insight into this area, the current paper has a specific focus on the perceptions of people living and working in a neighbourhood undergoing regeneration about the regeneration process and its effects.

THE RESEARCH

The research forming the basis of this paper was carried out in 2010–2011 to develop an approach for a longitudinal study of the impact and outcomes of an area-based regeneration initiative in the North East of England, commissioned by the Institute for Local Governance. The cross-disciplinary team involved researchers from Durham and Northumbria Universities from planning, housing, urban regeneration and employment backgrounds. One of the key tasks was to compile a detailed baseline capturing the current state of the area, using existing data from a variety of sources.

To provide further depth and qualitative information on the realities of life in the neighbourhood, 42 semi-structured interviews were carried out with local residents and people working or volunteering in the area, using a snowball sampling approach, which began with the local authority and voluntary associations. Twenty-two participants represented agencies, including the local authority (staff and elected officers), housing associations, schools, the police, and community, voluntary, religious and sports organisations. Around a quarter of these were also local residents, or lived in the surrounding area. The remaining 20 participants were long-term local residents aged from their 30s to their 80s. Just over half were female. Participants represented different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs, employment status and housing tenures. The sample included people living alone, living with family, those with or without children at local schools, and single parents; as well as people who had had to relocate because of demolitions.

Simple descriptive qualitative analysis was applied to the interview transcripts in order to identify and describe key themes and issues emerging from the data. The categories used were not pre-set but emerged during analysis as key common themes identified by a number of participants.

THE CASE STUDY

The focal point of the research is the former ‘heart’ of a small industrial town in Teesside. It is in a ward ranked among the 150 most deprived in England²³ in 2010, and where conditions have continued to worsen in recent years.²⁴

The area consists of streets of small terraced properties, along with a handful of small shops and businesses, community buildings, a diminishing selection of pubs and clubs, and places of worship. Its reason for being is the steel and shipping industries established following the discovery of iron ore deposits in the 1850s, which required local unskilled labour. The town grew quickly to provide housing for workers in what was to become an important centre for British industry. In its heyday the area was vibrant and self-sufficient, with its own weekly market and active social scene. By the 1960s, local iron ore mining ended, and technological changes meant less reliance on a local labour force. Industrial decline led to the slow deterioration of the area. By the late 1980s, there were reports of serious social problems: high unemployment, high crime rates and problems with anti-social behaviour.

The neighbourhood has suffered increasingly from housing market failure in recent years, and void housing has been a problem for at least the last two decades. By around 2000, terraced housing property prices had reached an all-time low of around £3,000, with the result that speculators bought properties in the area for private rental. Local estimates suggest that about 20 per cent of housing is let by private landlords, compared with around 9 per cent nationally.

Regeneration efforts starting in the 1990s included physical improvements, employment, education and community safety projects, funded by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). A 2001 report, however, suggested that there were still numerous problems, including social exclusion, low housing demand, unattractive housing stock, falling population, low incomes and ‘a degree of apathy within the community’.²⁵

In recent years, a series of regeneration plans for the area’s future have been developed. Based on their recommendations, and with funding from various sources, there has been widespread demolition of the terraced housing, so far without replacement; the area has lost a significant proportion of its population, mostly to the surrounding areas. The ward population fell by 19.2 per cent between 2001 and 2011, going from over 8,000 residents to just over 6,500²⁶. The local profile is now of an ageing population, with fewer children and young people than previously.

Despite the area’s problems, there are some positives. Educational achievement has been improving in recent years, and the local primary and secondary

schools both received 'good' Ofsted reports in 2010. New facilities have been built: a health village and library opened nearby in 2010, and there are plans for new shops and housing. There is a small but active community scene, and a number of community organisations and projects with committed staff and volunteers. The area is also known for its sport, with local clubs producing successful male and female football teams and amateur boxers. Local residents stressed the strength of the local community, describing a neighbourhood with community spirit, strong family networks and 'good neighbours'.

LOCAL EXPERIENCES OF REGENERATION

The following sections draw on interviews with people living, working and volunteering in the case study area to describe local experiences of the regeneration process. Examples from the interview data have been selected to illustrate some of the problems that research participants associated with life in a regeneration area.

Living with voids

Over recent years, a significant number of properties in the area had become empty. The latest estimates for the ward as a whole, from 2007, showed that 11 per cent of houses were empty, compared with around 4 per cent in surrounding comparator areas.

'Out my back the houses are all empty, dumping grounds'.

'It looks awful with all those empty houses'. (Research participants)

In some cases, properties had been cleared for eventual demolition. But there were also some private rental properties not marked for demolition, but without tenants. Private landlords were thought to be more concerned with the potential for getting compensation if their houses were demolished than ensuring a regular small income

from tenants. Because of this, there appeared to be little emphasis on ensuring properties were tenanted or investing money on maintenance to make them attractive to potential tenants.

Voids were a target for crime and anti-social behaviour. There were reports of local young people breaking into empty properties and using them as dens. The houses were often in a dangerous, unsound state, especially if they had been stripped of valuable fixtures and fittings. Empty properties attracted litter and encouraged fly-tipping. Arson was a significant problem. Several residents mentioned the worry of being among the last occupants of a terraced block, with the potential for arson attacks and anti-social behaviour targeting neighbouring empty properties. Nobody wanted to be living on a terrace with empty properties on it or, even worse, next door to a void property.

‘They need to be knocked down quickly when they become void’. (Research participant)

Neglect and abandonment of properties may have helped to accelerate the decline of the neighbourhood. The ‘broken windows’ theory²⁷ suggests that areas with visible signs of neglect or damage tend to attract more crime and anti-social behaviour. This view is echoed by Defra, the UK government department with responsibility for local environmental quality:

‘Local environment quality is an important issue that can have knock-on effects on several aspects of society. Left unchecked, dirty streets and neighbourhoods affect the perception of the local community which can lead to anti-social behaviour, disorder, vandalism and eventually serious crime.’²⁸

Negotiating relocations

The local authority used negotiations rather than Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) to clear houses for demolition. This was a legal requirement: CPOs could not be used because there was no definite end-use planned for the land. It may be argued that negotiations can be handled more sensitively than CPOs, although in reality this probably depends on a number of factors, including availability of attractive alternative housing, residents' willingness — or otherwise — to move, successful relationship building between parties, and the individual personalities involved. The process could be very time-consuming. There were suggestions that some residents held out on reaching an agreement in case they got offered more money. This may have been true in some cases. Many local residents, however, who were neither wealthy nor well connected, were unlikely to have access to legal advice or representation, and when presented with the rare offer of a lump sum of money, may have been inclined to take it immediately, whether it was a good offer or not. Several research participants spoke of the financial incentives offered to people to move house as potentially exploitative. Some stakeholders suggested that the compensation offered to owner-occupiers for properties to be demolished was too low to allow them to buy a new place to live, echoing the idea of an 'affordability gap'.¹⁷

Leaving home

A number of interviewees discussed how difficult and traumatic it was for residents to move out of their homes to make way for demolitions. This appeared to be particularly true for older residents, many of whom had lived in the area for many years and had had no thought of moving. One elderly woman who had to relocate had lived in the same house all her life. Even though her new home was less than a mile away, she found the move extremely daunting:

'I lived ... 83 years in the same house. I thought I would die here. I was moved out because my house was getting knocked down. (Since moving) I had to go to the doctors, I was crying all the time. He gave me some anti-depressants and that helped.' (Research participant)

It must be recognised that different people are likely to have diverse experiences and ways of coping with relocation. Although some residents suffered depression or anxiety as a result of being relocated, others said they were happy in their new homes, even if they had initially been reluctant to move.

Living with demolitions

The programme of housing demolition in the case study area was extensive; in the space of around ten years, the number of terraced properties had been reduced from about 1,200 to 300, with the majority of these being knocked down in two phases from 2006 to 2008 and 2008 to 2011. Although most respondents recognised the need to remove void housing, some people felt that too much of the area's housing had been demolished:

‘At the time it was as though if a street was derelict it was best getting it down but that just spread and spread and spread’.

‘Some good houses got demolished alongside the bad’. (Research participants)

Residents found it hard to watch so much of their neighbourhood being razed to the ground. A number of people expressed the fear that the entire area would be cleared:

‘It’s shrinking so much in just a couple of years there’ll be nowt left of it’.
(Research participant)

Environmental problems

To date, the regeneration process has done little to improve the physical appearance of the area; if anything, it has made it worse. Leaving aside short-term issues such as voids and demolition sites, housing clearance has exposed the ugly backs of terraces,

which were never meant to be on show. Most of the former housing sites have now been grassed over. Some local people suggested that this gave the area a pleasant, village-like feel; however, others thought the streets felt ‘desolate’ and abandoned. This feeling of abandonment also had the effect of heightening fear of crime for some residents.

‘Have you any idea how depressing it is living round here?’

‘It’s not a nice place to live ... it looks like a ghetto, that’s what it looks like’.
(Research participants)

Funding

Most residents appeared shocked by what they considered to be the exorbitant cost of regeneration. The amount of funding being committed to the area’s future, however, was undoubtedly seen as a positive development and a reassuring sign for residents:

‘People think they wouldn’t be spending all that money ... if they were going to flatten it in a year’s time’. (Research participant)

There was a distinct sense of incomprehension regarding where the regeneration funding that was allocated to the area — such as £11m for demolitions — had gone. How could it cost so much to knock down a few buildings? Linked to this, there was incredulity about reports of a funding gap, which meant the planned demolitions could not be completed on time. Respondents were surprised at the idea that the regeneration might have funding problems:

‘How come they ran out of money? They must have known what it was going to cost at the start. Suddenly halfway through there is no money ... Now they can’t afford to pay the demolition people.’ (Research participant)

Frustration at the lack of progress

Local residents were very frustrated by the lack of regeneration progress, and even more so that there was little or no sign of what they considered to be ‘real’ regeneration, meaning new housing and major improvements to the existing housing stock. Despite widespread housing demolition, research participants expressed frustration at the lack of new development. As one resident commented, local regeneration had amounted to ‘ten years of talk, lots of rubble, lots of rats, and no action’.

‘We seem to get a lot of promises and plans but nothing comes of them’.

‘They say we’re doing this, we’re doing that, but then they pull it all down ...’

‘They have been 10 years doing regeneration in (place name) and they have done nothing but pull down houses and that’s not regeneration.’ (Research participants)

The need to develop relationships and agreements between partner agencies, settle legal issues, obtain the necessary permissions, consult residents and conduct other negotiations in order to proceed with regeneration activities can contribute significantly to the cost of regeneration, and to the time it takes to achieve results. The requirement to use the available funding for the proper purpose and within the right time-frame, while at the same time making sure residents accept the planned changes and can still be housed, can be enormously challenging. Previous researchers have suggested that compromise is a key aspect of the job for regeneration professionals: ‘Good front-line regeneration practitioners are often reduced to simply trying to do their best in the moment as they are bounced from one crisis to another.’²⁹

Local residents can find this hard to understand. The situation is often very complicated and likely to be subject to constantly shifting pressures; unless local

people are closely involved with the regeneration process on an ongoing basis (for instance, by sitting on a regeneration partnership or steering group), it is unlikely that they have access to detailed information. Furthermore, they may well be uninterested in the finer detail of the situation, instead being primarily concerned with spotting visible signs of progress around them; in the absence of any such signs, they assume that nothing is happening. In the words of one interviewee:

‘People don’t understand the complexity of the situation — they think it’s just a case of flattening the houses and building some new ones.’ (Research participant)

It may be that regeneration professionals unwittingly reinforce this impression by endeavouring to communicate with residents about the regeneration process in the plainest and most easy-to-understand terms. Much of the communication to local residents about regeneration tends to be relayed in simple messages and ‘headlines’, rather than more detailed information. While there are good intentions behind such actions, it is perhaps not surprising that residents may fail to appreciate how complex things really are.

Fear for the future

Several local residents expressed their fear that the end was on its way for the neighbourhood. The extent of the demolitions and the lack of progress in building new houses had led people to speculate that the authorities were ‘trying to get rid of it, because it is an embarrassment’.

‘... the fear is that it would be obliterated’. (Research participants)

Long delays in regeneration progress and the designation of certain streets as ‘retain and monitor’ (which a number of people seemed to interpret as ‘knock down later’) in a 2008 master plan for the area led some residents to suspect that there was a secret strategy for managed decline; after all, the area’s problems could be solved by allowing the neighbourhood to get worse and worse until it was no longer viable and had to be pulled down.

‘People feel that the Council has let the area go down over the years, and has not done enough to stop its decline.’

‘It has been managed decline in (neighbourhood) to some extent for the last 20 years.’ (Research participants)

This idea that the neighbourhood might be pulled down did not come out of the blue; a 2004 housing renewal plan recommended complete demolition of the case study area. Although it was succeeded by two subsequent plans presenting strategies for renewing the area, it is perhaps understandable that some residents felt that the local authority had never abandoned their initial agenda.

‘People will always argue we haven’t improved their properties because they don’t know if the council are going to pull them down. You can understand this viewpoint.’ (Research participant)

Participants saw a clear link between the lack of regeneration progress over such a long period of time and the loss of local amenities such as businesses, shops and the market:

‘There is a feeling that the area has been stripped of its heritage, for example the local market, and the main shopping area.’

‘As the housing in the area declines and there are fewer people living in the area, businesses and shops are finding it harder to stay afloat.’ (Research participants)

Consultation fatigue

Most research participants living in the area said that they had previously taken part in consultation activities, although few were currently doing so. While loss of interest may be understandable over such a long timescale — with other studies describing the problem of ‘burnout’ for residents involved in regeneration projects¹⁹ — specific reasons were given for opting out of the consultation process. Several people said they felt they were not being listened to, either by those running the consultation or by other residents:

‘You can feel as if your opinion is not valued’

‘Sometimes you feel like it is the older generation’s group and you are out-voted.’ (Research participants)

These comments call to mind previous research findings warning of the danger of viewing communities as single, homogeneous entities,³⁰ and describing the difficulties associated with ensuring a sufficient level of resident involvement so that consultation findings are genuinely representative.³¹

Others felt that the consultation activity appeared to have had no real impact on results:

‘I’ve been to meetings but they didn’t achieve much.’

‘It’s like banging your head against the wall, nothing gets done, so what’s the point?’ (Research participants)

Some residents warned that extensive consultation processes could have raised people's expectations and paved the way for disappointment.

Regeneration fatigue?

A number of research participants suggested that life in the area over the past few years had left residents feeling weary, deflated and worn out:

‘It has been a long drawn-out process and it has exhausted people.’ (Research participant)

While this brings to mind the previously mentioned idea of regeneration fatigue,²⁰ it may be used in a much narrower sense in the current case, to convey the simple message that life in a neighbourhood that is undergoing a seemingly never ending programme of regeneration is exhausting and tough.

RESIDENT RESPONSES: SHOULD THEY STAY OR SHOULD THEY GO?

It may be argued that, if people do not like living in a neighbourhood undergoing regeneration, then they should get out. The reality is not that simple. There will be some residents who are happy to get away from the area, and are equipped with the physical, mental and practical resources to leave and settle elsewhere.

‘Most of the more aspiring families have got fed up and moved out of the area.’ (Research participant)

For others, there is no choice, because they cannot afford to move. Homeowners in the area cannot sell their houses and, even if they could, they would be unlikely to afford a house in another area. Residents on low incomes may not be in a position to move if it involves taking on extra debt.

The loss of those residents who are able to make the choice to leave can seriously compromise the profile of the remaining population and deplete the resources available within the community. A decade ago, a report following the SRB programme in the case study area described what were regarded as the two remaining types of local residents, 'those who have been there all their lives and don't want to or can't afford to move; and young people who move into the area because they cannot afford anywhere else'.²⁵ Ten years on, there has been further population loss, and the situation is likely to be even more acute.

Some residents may have positive reasons for wanting to stay in a neighbourhood. Many people living in the case study area had family living nearby, and some also had caring responsibilities, such as looking after grandchildren to enable their sons or daughters to work. This 'community capital' has been described as a crucial factor in the resilience of families in deprived neighbourhoods: 'For many people non-financial assets were often the strongest and most important assets they had, with dependence on families and social networks really standing out as crucial in combating the isolation they experienced' (Ref. 4, p. 2).

Some residents clearly placed a strong value on the local sense of community; one said they thought they would never have such good neighbours if they moved elsewhere. Others were attached to the area simply because it felt like home. Almost all research participants living in the area said they were committed to staying there for the foreseeable future, although it appeared that this was often in spite of, rather than because of, the ongoing regeneration.

CONCLUSION

While regeneration aims to improve local quality of life, deprived neighbourhoods undergoing regeneration programmes can sometimes seem to get worse before they get better. A number of negative aspects have been described. Local people may be

left out of pocket or even in debt; they may be mourning the loss of their home or parts of their neighbourhood, mystified by the cost and complexity of regeneration, frustrated by the lack of progress, filled with fear and uncertainty about what the future holds, and tired of having their views solicited and their hopes raised. While a number of residents spoke of consultation fatigue, it may be more accurate to say that they are suffering from regeneration fatigue.

The findings underline the need for honest and open communication between regeneration professionals and communities. Planners need to both share information and listen to what locals think, and there should ideally be an ongoing, two-way flow of information throughout the regeneration process. Information should be presented in a way that does not distort or oversimplify the picture. It is acknowledged that the business of communicating plans and progress to local residents can be difficult and time-consuming, but perhaps there is a need to move on from clear and simple headline messages, to more detailed information sharing. This could enhance residents' understanding of the cost and complexity of regeneration, and 'fill in the blanks' regarding regeneration progress that is not readily visible. Progress being made in regeneration is not always easy to spot, and local people may well need to be told about it. Equally, they need to be told when nothing is happening, and why.

The research also underlines the need to keep the community at the heart of the decision-making process. Views expressed by local people illustrated their excellent knowledge of the local situation; while they may be highly attached to the neighbourhood, they are under no illusions about its problems. As the people who know the neighbourhood best, their knowledge, experience and judgement must be taken into account. They may be best placed to know whether or not neighbourhoods and their constituent parts are redeemable. Communities must be trusted to have the best interests of their neighbourhoods at heart.

In any regeneration programme, there needs to be open recognition from the start that regeneration can be a long, slow road, that there will be no miracles, and that places may get worse before they get better. Regeneration professionals are usually well aware of this, but residents may not be, or may be letting hope get the better of them. It also must be acknowledged that communities can be further eroded during drawn-out regeneration processes, as communities are broken up — with the most

capable and ambitious residents often being the first to leave — and local shops and amenities struggle, or fail, to survive.

Other commentators have made the point that it is not just local solutions that are needed to improve the prospects of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but changes at other levels, too.³¹ At the time of writing, in July 2012, the UK Government's policy focus is on economic development through private sector investment, rather than regeneration, as reflected by funding programmes such as the Regional Growth Fund and Growing Places. Progress has stalled in many regeneration neighbourhoods because of the 2010 change in government and funding restraints imposed by the new administration, and many disadvantaged areas have felt the brunt of local government cuts. Further delays and increased uncertainty for residents of regeneration areas are among the consequences of such policy change.

The arguments put forward in this paper are based on research carried out during a short time period. It may be instructive to take a long-term view in order to find out how long such negative effects last, whether things continue to get worse before they improve, and how residents respond in the longer term. It remains to be seen, for instance, how attitudes to the regeneration programme in the case study area will change in another five or ten years' time, and what factors may affect this. The research described in this paper formed the first part of a planned longitudinal study, so there may be opportunities for further exploration. The findings outlined in this paper are based on a single case study. Application of a similar methodology in other deprived areas undergoing regeneration would be beneficial to ascertain whether similar problems exist.

NOTE ON THE RESEARCH

The research team aims to conduct a longitudinal study of the impact of regeneration in this neighbourhood, recording the journey of regeneration, identifying the impacts on the area and on residents' quality of life and well-being, and looking at what lessons can be learned for future regeneration work.

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